

January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022

### Isaiah 62:1-5 “Words of Affection”

Here are some of the words of affection that the prophet Isaiah uses to communicate God’s love for Israel – “Crown of beauty.” “My delight.” “Love of my life.” We use similar words to communicate love and affection to the people in our lives too. Here’s something you may or may not know. Mary’s parents called her “Mare-Bear” when she was a child. My parents called me “Jess-a-Bear” when I was a little guy too. So quite often we just call each other “Bear” which probably confuses the heck out of people, but it’s our thing that we’ve had for the last 35 years. It’s our way of expressing affection for each other. There are other terms of endearment we use that are circumstantial. For example when Mary makes a great batch of muffins the family will say, “All hail the Muffin Queen! Long may she reign.” These are loving words. Right now, I want you to take a moment to think about the terms of endearment that your loved ones use for you. How do you feel when you hear them? Now I want you to think of terms of endearment that *you* use for your loved ones. How do you feel when you speak them?

On the flip side of this, we know that there are names people use to put others down. Whoever said, “Sticks and stones may break your bones but names can never hurt you” must’ve been one tough cookie because names *do* hurt. My guess is that given the choice, there are some folks who might *prefer* the physical pain that sticks and stones cause because it doesn’t seem to stick around as long as the emotional pain that words can inflict. Here in Isaiah, we hear that God’s beloved Israel has been called all sorts of horrible and hurtful names, like “forsaken,” “desolate,” “reject,” “loser.” But Isaiah says that he won’t sit still and be quiet until the true beauty and belovedness of God’s people is known and revealed for all to see.

Tomorrow we observe Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. day. Although there were other voices at the time who stood up for the civil rights of African Americans and other marginalized racial minorities, he was one who, like Isaiah, would not be silent. His unwillingness to be silent was also what led to his death. Like Isaiah, Dr. King and others in the American Civil Rights Movement were reacting to the horrible and hurtful deeds and names that

were being used against God's beloved. Because words have power, I'm not going to speak any of those hurtful names that have been used against racial minorities in our country. I wish I could say that these words and names have been erased from our vocabulary, but they still exist, and they are still used to put down God's beloved. So, no hurtful *words* will be repeated, but I am going to spend some time talking about the hurtful *deeds* that have been used to put down God's beloved.

Although the end result of the American Civil War was the abolition of slavery, those on the losing side of that battle worked hard to make sure that black folks wouldn't be able to achieve the same power and privilege that white folks held for so long. Even though the institution of slavery had ended, there was still racial discrimination, racial segregation, and unequal rights between blacks and whites in this country. It's easy for us to look back in time and say, "Oh yeah, that whole business about segregation and Jim Crow laws? Awful. All those stories about how black folks couldn't use public water fountains or bathrooms? Terrible. All that nonsense about being forced to have separate seating on busses and movie theaters? Inconceivably shameful. But that was back then. We're much better than that nowadays. Just turn on the TV and see how many more racial minorities you see as news anchors or business owners or doctors or judges or influencers." And yes, that sort of progress is all good and everything, but what's hard for us to recognize are the ways in which we *still* discriminate. We want to think that the only people who practiced racial discrimination were those "ignorant cross-burning southerners" back in the 1950s who wanted to keep black children from attending public schools and who fought hard to make sure businesses still retained the right to refuse customers based on the color of their skin. But when you start talking about how racial discrimination is still alive and well *today*, especially when it comes to housing, incarceration, education, unemployment and just the general lack of opportunities to advance? That's when people say, "Whoa slow down there buddy ... you better be careful what you're saying." And yet, the voice of the prophet Isaiah calls out,

"For Zion's sake I will *not* keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,

and her salvation like a burning torch.”

There’s where we as God’s people need to step up to the plate and address the heartfelt needs of God’s beloved ones who, like Israel, have been on the receiving end of false and hurtful names and deeds. God is in the business of making old things new and turning wrong things into right. Throughout the Bible, we hear stories about men and women whose names have been changed to reflect their new identity and purpose. Abram and Sarai were re-named Abraham and Sarah when they were called to bear the children that would eventually become the Hebrew people. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel because he struggled with God in order to prove his worth as the one who would receive the blessing that would transform God’s people from nomadic wanderers to a holy nation whose light would shine for the world to see. In the New Testament, Saul received the name Paul when he was blinded by a great light on the road to Damascus ... a place where he was traveling to persecute Christians. When his sight was restored, the Risen Christ gave him a new name and a new purpose: To help build the church of Christ in the Roman world and be a light to the gentiles.

This passage from Isaiah that Mary read took place during a time when Israel was in exile. They had not been restored to their homeland yet. They were in a bad place physically, emotionally and spiritually. In this passage, though, God was speaking words of hope to the Israelites by assuring them that when they are finally restored, they can have a new role and a new purpose. God assured them that when they were finally restored, three things would happen

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1. Jerusalem would receive a new identity. Her enemies gave her hurtful names like “Desolate” and “Forsaken.” But God will replace those names with a new name - “My Delight.”

2. At first it sounds like Jerusalem would receive new clothes – specifically a “splendid garland and a royal turban.” But when you read a little closer, you realize that Jerusalem isn’t going to *get* new clothes, it’s that Jerusalem will *be* the new clothes. Jerusalem will become a sign of glory to God and God will be made known. Even though she receives a new identity, her real name will remain because Jerusalem means “peace.”

3. Israel will receive a sign of hope and new life. She will become like a faithful bride to God. So many of the prophets used metaphors suggesting that Israel, before the exile, was like an unfaithful spouse. But here the prophet says that when all is restored, the relationship between God and Israel will be fresh, exciting and new.

That's the message that God wanted to get across to Israel while they were in exile. That's why the prophet could not and would not be silenced. Good things are coming. Good news is coming. Proclaim it loud and proud.

Earlier I asked you to think about how you feel when you *receive* words of love and affirmation. Then I asked you to think about how you feel when you *speak* words of love and affirmation. Here's the last question I want you to consider this morning: What is your voice that cannot be silenced? What is that voice saying? For whom do you speak? As I have said on many occasions, our words matter but it is our deeds that matter more. What words and deeds will our brothers and sisters of color hear when they are being discriminated against and left behind? How will they know that we are allies? Before you answer that, let us remember the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who spoke on behalf of people of color on the margins and said, "In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." May we not rest or keep silent until vindication shines down like the dawn and salvation like a burning torch.